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ABSTRACT

Although few students terminate their pursuit of a doctorate during the course-work phase of their program, many doctoral students drop out around the time that they successfully complete planned courses, a period known as "all but dissertation" (ABD). An examination of how professional educators who added a doctoral program to their lives experienced the increased commitment of graduate work is presented here. The report is drawn from a study that featured two assumptions: professional educators live extremely busy lives as they balance work, family, health, community, and church demands; doctoral programs demand an ever-increasing amount of time and energy from students. The study was based on a review of 25 students' records in the University of Kentucky's Department of Educational Administration, where less than half of the students who complete the comprehensive exam earn the Ed.D. Phenomenological strategies were used to gather information on the participants' perceptions of the students' experiences. Four themes emerged: structure, pressure, support, and authority. In all cases, there was a point in the students' lives where their narrative shifted away from expressions of satisfaction with school to dissatisfaction with the doctoral experience. The narrative shift occurred when participants entered the different world of the doctoral candidate. (Contains 50 references.) (RJM)

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The Creation of ABD's:
A Turning Point in Educational Doctoral Programs?

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The Creation of ABD's:

A Turning Point in Educational Doctoral Programs?

Abstract

During the course work phase of a doctoral program few students decide to end the pursuit of the degree. Yet student dedication to the goal of graduating, so obvious during course work, seems to dissolve around or just after they successfully complete all planned courses and/or the Qualifying Examination. A review of student records in the University of Kentucky Department of Educational Administration and Supervision, shows that less than half of the students who complete the comprehensive examination earn the Ed.D.

Researchers have studied this predicament and concluded that doctoral candidates fail to complete doctoral programs for a variety of reasons: some become too busy with other endeavors; some find the financial situation too burdening; and some decide the demands on themselves and their families are too great. This report complicates the assignment of cause by adding yet another possible reason for the occurrence of ABDs. That reason is related to the implications of a sudden change in the learning environment which results in students being thrust into an unfamiliar and uncomfortable new student role.

Purpose of the Original Study

The essential and guiding purpose of the original study from which this report is taken was to understand how professional educators who add a doctoral program to their already full lives experience this increased commitment. Two assumptions guided the study: (1) professional educators live extremely busy lives balancing work, family, health, community and church demands; and (2) doctoral programs demand an ever increasing amount of time and energy from students. There is little literature about the complex lives managed by advanced degree students. Accordingly, the original study explored the experiences of adults who add a doctoral program to busy lives.

This report is extracted from that original study and focuses on the unexpectedly poignant story participants told of the time when the doctoral degree slipped out of their reach.

Context of the Original Study

The participants in the study were the twenty-five western Kentucky students who entered the first University of Kentucky, Department of Educational Administration and Supervision (EDA) doctoral program offered through compressed, interactive video. The story told by these students was unique to them and their exposure to doctoral education. Participants entered the program in Fall 1990 and began course work in Spring 1991. When fieldwork for the study began, two students had put their programs on hold, three remained active though they had moved out of the area, and all but four had successfully completed the Qualifying Examination.

These 12 women and 13 men were between the ages of 30 and 53 when they entered the program. More women were in the 30 to 39 age range whereas more men were between 40 and 50 years of age. One student was 53 in Fall 1990. These students had aged almost five years when this study of their experience began in Spring 1995.

Most participants were, or had been, married when they entered the program. After entry, two divorced and one, who entered the program single, married. Two students remained single throughout the portion of the doctoral program included in this study, and three participants welcomed their first or second child. Two students built new homes; three moved to other regions in Kentucky; and three had either lateral or vertical changes in their professional positions. Four students began the program as teachers and three of those are currently administrators. The remaining students were public or private school administrators or consultants with the State Department of Education.

The EDA doctoral program required a master's degree, and therefore all 25 students had that degree. Approximately half of them earned their master's degree between 1969 and 1979; the remaining half earned their degrees after 1979. Six participants received their master's degree between 1967 and 1974; twelve between 1975 and 1983; and the remaining seven, between 1984 and 1988. Regional universities awarded 22 of these degrees; research 1 universities awarded two, and a private college awarded one. One student did complete his master's work in 1991 just as the doctoral program was starting. Although these students had ongoing professional education experiences, for most a considerable length of time had passed between receiving their master's degree and entering the doctoral program. "I guess the last class I took was in '79 or '80. And this [UK doctoral program] came up in '90. I thought, 'What the heck, I might as well try!'"

These students grew up and were employed in rural areas of Kentucky. They live in farming, mining, and small town environments given that western Kentucky is essentially rural with small communities scattered throughout the geography. The two sites used for course work, Paducah and

Owensboro are a considerable distance from the University of Kentucky in Lexington: Paducah is 262 miles away and Owensboro is 174. Driving those miles takes between three and five hours so driving to Lexington for course work from either location is simply a prohibitive venture.

Their classes began in late afternoon and lasted two and a half hours. The course work included 15 three-semester hour courses; all but three being taught by EDA faculty. Courses focused on educational reform, educational leadership, and systematic inquiry. All course work was delivered to set groups called cohorts. Faculty members delivered instruction in one of three ways: (1) some traveled to west Kentucky every week to teach their courses; (2) some mixed site-instruction with compressed-video instruction; and (3) some taught essentially the entire course using compressed video. Very few courses used final examinations, as most faculty members preferred culminating projects or papers, to demonstrate acquired competence. "Not having final examinations was a surprise to me; I was used to those multiple-choice and true-false finals!"

Required course work ended Fall semester 1993 and Qualifying Examinations began. The Examination had two portions, a written and an oral part. The written portion was conducted on-site; while the oral portion used compressed video to connect the University of Kentucky, Murray State University, and either the Paducah or Owensboro site. By December 1993, 18 students had successfully completed their Qualifying Examinations. Three students were unable to take the examination then, and three completed only the written portion. One student re-took and passed the Examination one year later. Seven students have had dissertation proposals accepted, and three of those have successfully defended their dissertations. As of April 1998, three students out of the 25 who started the program in Fall 1990, have received the Ed.D. degree and one is hoping to defend by September.

Design of the Study

The points of curiosity stimulating the original study reflected a particular paradigm of inquiry. I used phenomenological strategies to gather information on the participants' perceptions of their experiences. I explored participant impressions by using a highly qualitative process involving small group and individual interviews (Barritt, et al., 1985; Tesch, 1994; Creswell, 1994; Spradley, 1979). Interviews capitalized on the benefits of open-ended probes for information (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992; Patton, 1992).

All 25 participants were invited to introductory meetings, however, only eight participants attended these four small-group meetings in Spring 1995. The format planned for the meetings,

scheduled to introduce the research project, changed once the meetings began; the eight participants brought their own agendas to the meetings, causing a shift in focus. Although I explained the purpose of the study, reviewed participants' rights, and received signed confidentiality forms, these meetings became the first interviews of the research process. Besides talking about their experiences, the eight people asked many student-to-student questions.

I contacted the remaining participants by phone and scheduled interviews with each person and then traveled to west Kentucky during the next six months conducting interviews. All the participants agreed to allow the recording of interviews. Participants turned off the tape recorder when they did not want a record of a certain part of the conversation. Occasionally I turned off the recorder if a participant asked me to exchange my researcher-participant role for a student-to-student role. I completed thirty-six interviews by July 1995 interviewing all participants once, nine participants twice, and two participants three times. Participants for return interviews were selected based on (1) my desire to clarify something said in the first interview, (2) because I sensed this particular individual had more to tell me, or (3) some participants were willing to give me more time.

I reviewed documents relevant to the program when a written resource might provide useful information. Such documents included: announcements about the program, course syllabi, departmental information on critical program transition points, and the information held in student departmental files. I received written permission from each participant to review student files. As the information gathering phase of this study continued, departmental faculty shared their perceptions of the program and the students. Everything gathered through documents and discussions with faculty became part of the information used to understand the lives of participants.

Data transformation began with the first transcribed interview. Transformation required frequent reading of interview transcripts and repeated coding: first with descriptive codes, later with analytic codes and finally with interpretive codes (Wolcott, 1994). Descriptive codes stayed close to the data, reflecting actual events and emotions described by participants. Analytic codes added a systematic consideration of themes and relationships found among the themes (Merriam and Simpson, 1995; Wolcott, 1988 and 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Interpretive coding contributed a more abstract conceptualization of what had been described and analyzed. This approach to coding data began with the generation of many initial descriptive codes and ended with a pivotal interpretive code.

Overview of the Study Findings

The three analytical themes and one interpretive theme gleaned from the data organize the narrative told by participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These themes are: **structure**, **pressure**, **support** and **authority** (control). Though highly interrelated, the four themes have aspects unique to themselves. I view these themes as having a texture much like unrefined Shetland wool; there are twigs and burrs interspersed in the fiber, providing the unique characteristics of each sample of yarn. Though individual strands may be different, they all have a similar quality, making them Shetland and not mohair yarn. So too, each participant had a unique story. Yet when woven together, the individual stories reflect similar attributes. Some parts of individual stories are similar while other parts are unique; some parts are clearly yarn whereas others are burrs and twigs.

Structure

This study defined **structure** as the effective arrangement of tasks and resources leading to desired results. In an educational setting, "highly structured contexts provide clear expectations for action and sometimes even instructions for enactment; they provide consistent feedback and are contingent and responsive; challenges are geared at a level appropriate to the individual's competence" (Skinner, 1995, p. 56). Appropriate structure promotes an experience of self-control by providing objective control conditions that will connect means and ends, thereby assuring that individuals have the resources needed to succeed, and contributing to interpretations of performances. Educational structures include, for example, the number of required course credit hours in a doctoral program, the number of years needed to finish the program, or course syllabi detailing content area objectives and specifying the course pace, performance events, and judgment criteria. Knowing in advance what to expect in a course allows students time to restructure their schedules and accommodate course requirements. Knowles (1984) states that adults want to know exactly what to expect. Knowing what to expect ahead of time provides a sense of control over what will soon occur.

Structure is evident in such mundane tools as daily planners or calendars used to keep track of appointments, job deadlines, or personal tasks and special occasions. Time to awake, leave for work, eat lunch and dinner, complete personal and home chores, and return to bed are elements of structure that keep individuals feeling that they control their lives.

The literature on perceived control distinguishes three types of structure: task-based; rule-based; and interpersonal structures (Skinner, 1995). Task-based refers to situations in which accomplishment is the goal; rule-based means regulation is the effect; and interpersonal structure

exists when the adaptation of another person is the purpose of action (Belmont, Skinner, Wellborn, and Connell, 1988; Skinner, 1995). Although these three sources are based on studies of control in K-12 classrooms they appear, to an extent, in the data of this study. However, participants spoke of structure in terms of time, task, rules, roles, and priorities. So, although the types of structure identified in the literature are reasonable, the identifiers discussed by participants are more meaningful in interpreting what they perceived as structure.

Pressure

Defined as a sense of obligation for tasks, responsibilities, and relationships, **pressure** includes the conditions of demand, stress, and strain. Demands are environmental situations requiring effort, attention, and the use of resources. The tension between demands and resources in specific events results in feelings of being hassled and leads to stress. Strain is a negative emotional response to stress and appears as a feeling of being overburdened, exhausted, inadequate, or pressed beyond comfort (Koeske and Koeske, 1991).

In educational and work settings, pressure comes from task difficulty, workload, and time limitations or deadlines. In formal educational settings, individuals apply pressure to themselves by deciding what criteria they must meet to please an instructor; they create expectations of themselves based on their perceptions of instructor's wishes and peer competence. Pressure also permeates workplaces in perceptions of what actions either assure success in particular positions, or lead to achieving another placement in an organization. Built on self expectations of how families function or behaviors of family members in certain events, family pressures compound the amount of stress and strain people feel.

In life, as in a doctoral program, pressure comes from people (faculty, family, friends, peers, and self), from tasks (work, special events, assignments, and chores), from physical demands (traveling, sitting, and listening), from cognitive requirements (reading, thinking, and writing), and from emotional sensations (ambiguity, confusion, and frustration). Finance and health can aggravate already taxing situations. The preceding list of pressure points is not comprehensive. Rather, it provides examples of where pressure arises in daily life. Structure eases the pressure people feel; adults may create structures allowing them high functional levels in many areas of their lives. They feel responsible, active, and competent. However, entering a classroom can recreate the uneasiness of previous educational experience and confidence can decrease. Although excited by a new learning experience, adults can feel some uncertainty (Lawler, 1991). This sense of uncertainty can lead to

increases in felt pressure. At such times in life, support from others aids in rebuilding lost confidence and removing some uncertainty.

Support

This study defined **support** as access to significant others who help release the pressure associated with complicated lives:

> When speaking of surviving education, the factor that is...most crucial is a supportive learning community. [T]his community functions as a support network of learners who reassure each other that the feelings of inadequacy, confusion, and depression that they experience individually are not idiosyncratic but shared by all (Brookfield, 1990, p. 55).

McClary (1990) notes that having someone to talk with about pressures helps decrease anxiety. Her research shows that central to decreasing pressure is having accessible friends who listen and support personal feelings and concerns.

Tough (1967, 1979) continually emphasizes adults' reliance on external resources, both human and material, and points out that adults generally want more, rather than less, assistance in their learning efforts. Support develops through close association with other students, in the proximity of material resources, and through frequent and consistent association with faculty. Faculty support plays a critical role in students' lives (Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Benet, 1977; Heiss, 1970; Katz and Hartnett, 1976; Mah, 1986; McClary, 1990; Sternberg, 1981; Vartuli, 1982).

Authority

How individuals acknowledge power and control in life situations is integral to how they view authority (Skinner, 1995). In this study, the **authority** theme appears in two different contexts: the authority a person assigns to the self or personal control over circumstances (Griffith, 1987) and the authority a person assigns to others or the power delegated to others to determine a person's behavior. Faculty and employers emerged as powerful others identified by this study's participants. Family members also affected how participants would act in particular situations. The students themselves maintained some authority for their own actions and accepted personal responsibility for how they allocated their time and energy.

Studies of advanced students suggest that they willingly delegate authority to faculty when entering formal learning situations (Brookfield, 1985; Thiel, 1984). Merriam notes that adults rely on previous schooling experiences when searching for appropriate classroom behaviors (as cited in Feuer and Geber, 1988), and Knowles remarks that adults will "lean back, cross their arms, and say okay, teach me" when they return to formal instructional environments (Ibid., p. 35). Chene (1983)

and Candy (1987) both discuss the autonomy aspect of adult lives in juxtaposition to the reality of formal educational experiences.

In summary, structure provides an order for managing tasks, pressure occurs in the act of task management, and support helps alleviate some of the building pressure. The act of retaining authority over events or entrusting that authority to others can either extend or reduce structure, pressure and support in daily lives. These four themes were consistently evident in this study's data and, as stated earlier, help organize the resulting story.

The Thematic Links

"[The] simple enunciation of something extremely obvious, makes you appreciate, for the first time, its truth."

Colin Dexter, The Way through the Woods, 1992 (p. 220)

Though described separately above, the four themes are in reality closely interconnected with and dependent upon one another. In this section I describe some of the complex interconnections between and among the four themes of structure, pressure, support, and authority and then briefly present the conceptual links I see among the four themes and specific social learning and cognitive style constructs. I conclude by illustrating the usefulness of these constructs in understanding the turning point that appeared in participant stories when they discussed the time after the Qualifying Examination.

Interconnections of the Four Themes

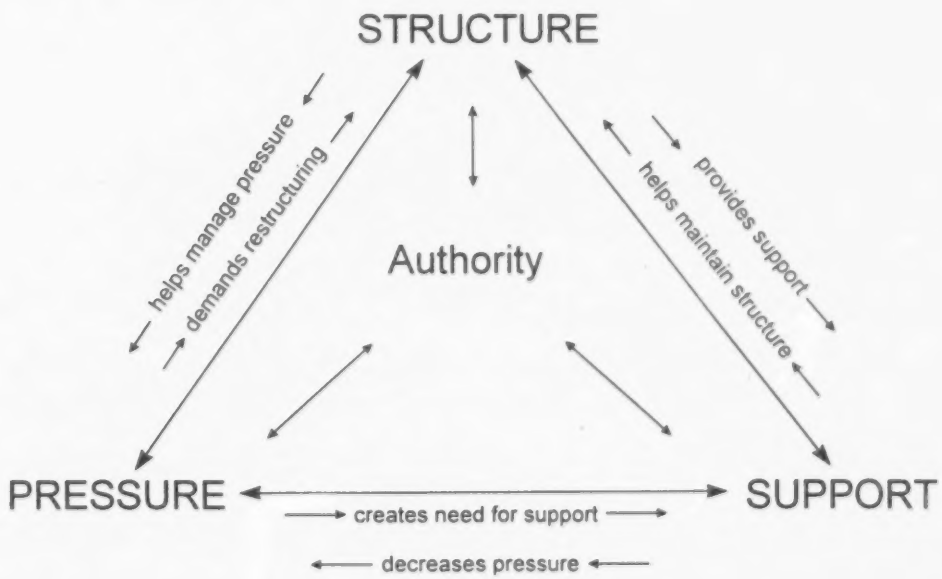
Within participant experiences of the doctoral program, the themes highlighted in this study share a complicated, symbiotic relationship. For instance, as participants in this study described authority they referred to personal authority as a mechanism they employed to adjust their personal life structures. At the same time, they considered delegated authority as a mechanism that established structure through which they could fulfill their professional, personal, and student obligations. Alterations of personal structures were within their control, whereas externally determined structures were less responsive to their personal authority. Participants experienced personal and delegated authority as counterbalanced components that influenced the degree of authority they exercised in their professional and personal roles.

The shifts participants could make in their personal structures helped them control some of the pressure that accumulated during the doctoral program, while at the same time, professional and

student requirements continued to exert demands for structural adjustments to accommodate changing priorities. When either personal or delegated authority increased or decreased the amount of perceived pressure that participants associated with structural demands, the pressure to perform that they were experiencing would increase or decrease. When the authority delegated to others increased the demands on participants, their sense of being under pressure grew, whereas the infrequent decreases in demands by either source of authority would reduce pressure. Participants found that support helped ease the sensation of growing pressure while increases in pressure created a need for more support. The structures afforded by well-defined life role expectations offered support, and through those structures participants found both personal and delegated authority reinforced and helped maintain the structures needed for successful performances. In turn, when support was sufficient, structure was easier to maintain.

Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of this complex, symbiotic relationship. In it, structure, pressure, and support are located at the three cusps of an isosceles triangle, with the direction of interaction shown in connecting lines between the themes. These arrowed lines reflect the multi-directional quality of thematic interactions. The authority theme is located in the center of the isosceles triangle, and again the directions of interaction are reflected with arrowed lines.

Figure 1: Interconnections of the Four Themes



Thus, in this study, the theme of structure has two variations: (1) structure through which participants manage their tasks and obligations so that everything for which they feel a responsibility will, indeed be accommodated; and (2) structure through which faculty members organize the academic content, learning activities, and performance evaluations associated with the doctoral program. Accordingly structure includes a degree of both personal and delegated authority (control). Participants described two qualities related to authority: (1) authority they delegated to others that permitted those others to control some aspects of their lives; and (2) authority or the control that was personal and used to manage certain aspects of their own lives. When they spoke of pressure, participants talked about demands on their time or their abilities that increased the sense of stress and, in some cases, resulted in feelings of strain. In the lives of these participants, support included both emotional and intellectual involvement and help. They found support in tangible and intangible interactions with people and resources, and they referred to support that was both given to and received from others.

In some conversations, participants talked about their experiences in ways that obscured the connectedness of the themes. In these interviews the themes were revealed in a subtle, deft way comparable to a Magic Eye representation. In other conversations, participants expressed the interwoven nature of the themes through indisputably clear illustrations. They related their experiences in sentences and short vignettes that left no doubt about the interconnection of themes. For example:

> I think some people have a very high need for structure. There are people who are uncomfortable with change and become frustrated if we get word coming down that there is a change in the schedule or the program. Some people get very frustrated over that and they want it all laid out from the beginning. They don't want any changes.
>
> You see our other worlds expand into every bit of space that is available and if we don't have space carved out then we just don't do it. It's not what any of us would consciously choose, it's just a matter of the responsibilities that we have filling whatever space is available. Sometimes we just can't do everything--the pressure gets to be too much!
>
> The relief of the written being over was...it was almost like "I guess if that's not good enough for them, then it's not good enough, because I gave them everything I had." And so with the orals, I guess I was nervous about it, but it was like "I've given it my best shot and I feel pretty good about it and if that's not good enough, I don't know if I'll do them again." That was almost my feeling; I don't think I could do any better than I did. Because of the amount of time I put in and the stress level, and everything else that was going on.

Conceptual Links

In The Way through the Woods (1992, pp. 58-59), Dexter says: *"The neglect of the obvious is always the beginning of unwisdom"* and in the academic world, wisdom can be found in the knowledge base. To understand more completely the experiences of participants in the doctoral program, I pursued possible conceptual linkages within the knowledge base. This pursuit enriched and extended my understanding of the phenomena I studied by refining the original points of inquiry and establishing tentative links to other empirical studies.

This section employs the literature on social learning and cognitive style theory to deepen understanding and explore the potential meanings of the four themes. By taking advantage of established constructs, I can more satisfactorily explain some aspects of participant stories, including the disruption in the flow of their doctoral experiences that appears after the Qualifying Examination.

Many attributes of the social learning construct of locus of control relate closely to this study's themes. Similarity between the elements of this construct and the themes in the study is situated in the primary premise of locus of control. In a simplified definition of the construct, Taylor (1984) explains that locus of control refers to the manner in which people differ in the degree of association or relationship that they place between their own behavior and consequent outcomes. Lefcourt (1982) articulates locus of control as an individual's perception of control that is demonstrated in one's generalized belief or disbelief in personal control of one's own fate. He adds that control beliefs have strong implications for how individuals cope with stress and engage in challenges.

The locus of control construct includes two central control belief tendencies: *external* locus of control and *internal* locus of control. According to Lefcourt, people should not be characterized as internals or externals, however. Rather, they can be "said to hold internal or external control expectancies *about different aspects of their lives* [emphasis added]" (Ibid., p. 187). These external and internal control tendencies are comparable to the two applications of authority articulated by study participants. For instance, internal control, like personal authority, involves perceiving events as being a consequence of one's own actions, and thereby being in some personal control of what happens in life. Individuals who hold internal control expectancies believe that their own behavior produces whatever results they experience. A participant who says, "I earned that A. I worked hard for it!" appears to believe in the control she has over her own learning results.

Conversely, external control expectancies reflect a belief that events are unrelated to a person's behavior and are therefore beyond personal control. Individuals who hold external control expectancies tend to believe that fate, luck, or powerful others determine the result of their efforts

(Taylor, 1984). The delegated authority of which participants spoke is similar to external control, in that they deeded some authority over to powerful others and then seemed to feel that those others would exercise the delegated authority to guide them through all aspects of the doctoral program. Much of their decision to relinquish some control is situated in their long history of student-teacher role expectations, referred to as a reluctance to maintain autonomy when placed in learning environments (Brookfield, 1990; Candy, 1987; Feuer and Geber, 1988). A participant who says, "I got an A, but I think it was because she was just being nice to me" seems to attribute her earned grade to the beneficence of a powerful other, her appointed educational guide, instead of to her own hard effort.

People relying on an internal control expectancy are more likely to negotiate successfully the whims and bafflements of different situations because they have greater confidence in their own problem-solving abilities (Lefcourt, 1982). In contrast to the inclination to function from a position of self-confidence, as internals can do, externals tend to find the path through life is replete with doubt. A more internally functioning participant would remark that he "did the best I could do" in the oral performance for the Qualifying Examination, whereas a participant functioning from external tendencies might comment that "Dr. However got me through" the oral portion.

Individuals with internal control tendencies display definite proactive behaviors when they endeavor to achieve valued goals. Their cognitive dispositions urge them to gather and use information that will facilitate decision-making efforts (Seeman, 1963), and their belief that they can act on their own behalf leads to their acquiring sufficient information before making decisions. One participant who purchased a number of dissertations to use as examples of how to write his own seems to be confident in his ability to develop strategies that lead to eventual success. He moves slowly in making style decisions about his own dissertation. People with internal control tendencies are likely to devote considerable effort to making decisions (Rotter and Mulry, 1965) and be cautious about their choices (Lefcourt, 1982). Conversely, externally motivated individuals tend to place more confidence in consensual judgments then they do in their own independent assessments (Crowne and Liverant, 1963). Powerful others are used to confirm the appropriateness of decisions that externals are trying to make. The participant who relied on his Major Advisor for identification of research topics or strategies was apparently more confident in the ability of a powerful other than in his own capacity to perform.

Further, people with internal control tendencies are relatively more autonomous and goal-directed in their tasks than are those with external control tendencies and internal control tendencies tend to lead to successful performances in less structured situations (Compas, 1987; Duncan and

Morgan, 1980; Moos and Billings, 1982). One participant who struggled through the frustrations associated with dissertation proposal tasks needed only a reasonable amount of guidance and was seemingly secure in her own capacity to produce an acceptable final product. In contrast, external control tendencies appear in the on-going desire for highly structured activities (Lefcourt, 1982). The confidence externals show in the judgments of authority figures is evident in their willingness to remain dependent on these others. One participant who wanted "a road map" for course work or "a checklist" for dissertation proposal development seemed to be depending on a powerful other to structure her efforts.

Individuals with internal or external control tendencies have differing ways of dealing with tasks. For instance, internals will perform well in low-structure, more ambiguous tasks, whereas people with external control expectancies are less adaptable to task demands and consequently have problems adjusting to low-structure situations. In addition, they are more attuned to normative responses (the wishes of others) than self-beliefs and values. The participant who kept trying to respond to course work assignments by trying to figure out "what they want" was less secure in her own capacity to create an acceptable response and more concerned that her responses match the beliefs and values of her instructors. Another participant, who felt that his written responses to questions in the Qualifying Examination should reflect what his professor had taught in class and not the student's own thinking, seems to have been reacting from external control expectancies.

Thus, difficult tasks are approached differently by individuals, depending on their situational locus of control. Whereas individuals with internal inclinations value their success at difficult tasks and are less upset when they fail at such tasks, those with external expectancies rejoice at success with easy tasks and are crushed by failure at difficult tasks. Lefcourt (1982) suggests that these affective responses are the expected reactions from internals, in that they are more realistic, goal-directed, and achievement-oriented. He suggests also that the reactions of externals to success or failure reflect their lack of confidence in their goal pursuits. The participant who "really enjoyed the orals" seemingly reacted from internal tendencies, and another participant who "just stopped" working on his dissertation proposal because he "couldn't figure out how to please" his Major Advisor and Advisory Committee may have verbalized an external expectancy reaction to this difficult task.

As Lefcourt (1982) states, individuals with external control tendencies will back away faster from difficult situations that increase their sense of pressure. They will also be debilitated by the tension associated with delays in gratification and seem to expect feelings of stress and strain to accompany many of their goal pursuits. On the other hand, individuals with internal control

expectancies more readily accept the challenge of difficult assignments and can better tolerate delays in gratification. Lefcourt (1982) suggests that individual perceptions of control have much to do with how individuals confront life stress. The participant who felt "I just can't do that to myself again" when discussing the rigor of self-control and denial associated with completing a dissertation seemed to be moving away from the challenge. Two other participants who said they were satisfied with what they had thus far received from the doctoral program also hinted that they had lost their commitment to earn a doctoral degree.

The most salient aspects of locus of control relating to the four themes in this study are the similarities in how externals and internals appear to deal with authority, structure, and pressure. The meanings attached to authority by participants seem to reflect the general descriptions in locus of control literature for external and internal control expectancies. Given the similarity of personal and delegated authority and internal-external control tendencies, the ties between control expectancies and the themes of structure and authority help enrich an understanding of how participants managed their doctoral experiences. When participants delegated authority to faculty members to structure the doctoral experience, they externalized the control of the program. After they deeded this authority, they seemed to revert to earlier experiences in learning environments by wanting more structure and guidance, not less. The demand--outcome relationship of pressure, appears in the tendencies of externals to shy away from intense challenges and to respond to failures in meeting challenges by feelings of devastation instead of persistence.

Locus of control helps explain potential meanings of the stories my participants told by adding exegetic strength to how I have analyzed and interpreted the experiences these students had in the doctoral program. It is not an all inclusive construct, however: it is not similar to competence or intelligence that apply to every aspect of human enterprise. Locus of control is better defined as "a circumscribed self-appraisal pertaining to the degree to which *individuals view themselves* [italics added] as having some causal role in determining specified events" (Lefcourt, 1982, p. 183). As Rotter (1966) suggests, there is a consistent relationship between generalized expectancies for locus of control and performance in situations that are familiar to individuals. Accordingly, when an individual is in a familiar situation, there will be a tendency to base expectancies on similar experiences. The participants in this study seemed to balance internal and external tendencies during the familiar course work phase of the doctoral program and only displayed definite external control tendencies when they entered its dissertation phase. This observation is supported by Lefcourt

(1982) when he states that locus of control will shift with unusual events toward more belief in external control.

Another conceptual construct that has explanatory power for this study is that of field dependence-independence. This construct is a part of the larger body of knowledge on cognitive style, and as such, it shares some logical premises with the social learning construct of locus of control. One similarity appears in the definition of cognitive style itself as provided by Pratt (1984): "Cognitive style is a qualitative aspect of intellectual function related to how an individual perceives the world and solves problems pertaining to those perceptions" (p. 151). This construct refers to individual perceptions of the world and approaches to solving problems, just as the locus of control construct deals with individual perceptions related to the causal association of control and outcomes.

Pratt (1984) states that field dependence-independence "in broad terms is a description of psychological differentiation" (p. 151), and Witkin et al., (1962) describe psychological differentiation in terms that highlight the logical overlap with the locus of control construct:

> With respect to relations with the surrounding field, a high level of differentiation implies clear separation of what is identified as external to the self. The self is experienced as having definite limits or boundaries. Segregation of the self helps make possible *greater determination of function from within* [italics added], as opposed to a more or less enforced *reliance on external nurturance and support* [italics added] for maintenance typical of the relatively undifferential state (p. 10).

Psychological differentiation, or field dependence-independence, has apparent similarities with locus of control or at least similar patterns of relationship. These similarities lead Lefcourt (1982) to suggest that the two constructs "can be used conjointly" and may be highly compatible when used together to understand achievement outcomes.

The construct of field dependence-independence is particularly informative for my study, because my data gathering conversations were always organized around participant experiences in the doctoral program, and therefore they obviously situated their stories in academic experiences. The connections between the four themes of my study and the characteristics of individuals that define field dependence-independence are highlighted in the following comparative descriptions of the two cognitive styles.

A *field-independent* cognitive style is associated with analytical propensities. These individuals are more concerned with ideas and abstract principles and demonstrate a capability for cognitive restructuring (Witkin, et al., 1977). In students, the capacity for cognitive restructuring results in less need of teacher-imposed structure and information (Gibson, 1990). In turn, this ability leads to more autonomy in relationships with others that makes field independent individuals more

socially independent (Gibson, 1990: Spotts and Mackler, 1967), and they are more likely to prefer solitary, impersonal situations. Brookfield (1985) characterizes field-independent learners as individualistic with a strong sense of self-identity while Pratt (1984) explains that they tend to be more single-minded, goal-oriented, and self-directed. Thus, field-independence is similar to maintaining an internal locus of control. In the stories told by participants in my study, only one student seemed to perceive himself as field-independent, and he did so only through excluding a key social aspect of the program from his comments: he did not speak about the friendship or assistance of the cohort nor did he associate himself with a small group, although he was a member of both social configurations.

A *field-dependent* cognitive style is described in quite different terminology. Individuals exhibiting this style tend to be extrinsically oriented, and accordingly, they are more likely to be drawn towards other people (Gibson, 1990). They are likely to have external social frames and to defer to others in ambiguous situations (Witkin, 1977). Field-dependent students rely more heavily on instructors for information and guidance. Thiel (1984) compares field-dependent individuals to Kolb's (1980) "accommodators," in that they find social group connections highly beneficial in learning situations and prefer trial-and-error learning activities that require experimentation in investigating concrete experiences.

Accommodators depend on others for information rather than on their own analytic ability (Ibid.), recognize the social context of learning, and are attentive to social cues. Many of the stories told by participants elevated the supportive nature of the cohort and small groups into a narrative core. Participants consistently spoke of the "support of the cohort" and how "someone in the cohort would have an answer when I didn't know something" or admit that, now that they are in the final phase of the doctoral program, they "miss their support group."

Field-independent and field-dependent individuals have different needs for structure. Being more single-minded, goal-oriented, and self-directed, field-independent individuals prefer less structure and guidance from instructors than do field-dependent individuals, who are inclined to place learning in its social context and use other people as important resources. In addition, field-dependent people prefer to take their cues for appropriate behavior from others instead of relying on themselves to sort out what is required and plan how to deliver it. Accordingly, they prefer well-structured learning situations and organized instructional materials or processes.

In my study no one spoke about wanting learning situations that required more self-planned efforts. Instead, everyone spoke of wanting more structure, more resources, and more guideposts along the way. Participants wanted faculty members to "tell us what to do" and they rebelled in the

two courses that "had no clear direction," saying that "[the instructor] didn't know what he was doing" or "he couldn't teach." As with people who exhibit external locus of control tendencies, these field-dependent students seemed more susceptible to approval of their actions by others than they were to their own judgments of their performance. Some participants wanted "a group dissertation" commenting, "I think that would help everybody" and "then we could support each other better." They talked about how a group-developed dissertation would "play to each person's strengths" because "some of us don't write well, but we are good at doing research on topics" or "we are good at math, so we can do the statistics part."

As suggested by these quotations, field dependent and field-independent characteristics include both cognitive and social skills. According to Witkin, et al. (1977), "[t]he particular relationship in which these skills are combined makes the field dependence-independence dimension bipolar, in the sense of not having a clear high or low end" (p. 198). Individuals who are field-independent will have high cognitive restructuring skills and personal autonomy qualities but low social sensitivity qualities and social skills. Field-dependent individuals are high in social sensitivity and social skills but low in personal autonomy and cognitive restructuring skills. It is the distinctive relationship in which these skills and qualities are combined that makes the dimension bipolar (Ibid.). Figure 2, below, reflects the bipolar relationships of these skills and qualities:

Figure 2: Field Dependent-Independent Cognitive and Social Skills

Cognitive/Social Skills	*Field-Independence*	*Field-Dependence*
Cognitive Restructuring	**HIGH**	*LOW*
Personal Autonomy	**HIGH**	*LOW*
Social Sensitivity	*LOW*	**HIGH**
Social Skills	*LOW*	**HIGH**

The bipolar nature of field-dependent and field-independent skills and qualities is apparent. For example, participants relied heavily on the social structures of the program to maintain them through the course work phase and the Qualifying Examination event. Many were sure they "wouldn't have made it without my group" and "we learned more from each other sometimes than we did from the faculty." My data support the importance of the social context of the cohorts and small groups in providing needed structure and support for participants and, in addition, suggest that they seemed most comfortable when they learned in groups and performed within well-structured courses.

In 1977 Witkin et al. reported on a longitudinal study wherein a large group of students (1,548) was followed from college entry into graduate or professional school. This study provides a source of insight for the role of field dependent-independent cognitive styles in the lives of my study's participants. The intent of Witkin's study was to determine any relationship between students' choice of major and their cognitive style and the results demonstrated a notable predilection in students to choose, or change to, an academic major compatible with their cognitive style. Accordingly, relatively field-independent students favored the more impersonal domains collectively referred to as the sciences whereas *relatively field-dependent students preferred interpersonal domains such as education and nursing.*

The conclusions Witkin et al. draw from their study offer a possible explanation for the experiences of this study's participants. For instance, it is possible that many of them may have entered the field of education because this domain capitalizes on academic content that is primarily social in nature, that requires interpersonal interactions, and that does not demand extensive analytical thinking and abstract thought. Perhaps many of the students who participated in the first west Kentucky doctoral program were inclined to view the world from a more field-dependent perspective. They would, therefore, have been more comfortable in the social environment of course work where they had the intellectual and emotional support of cohort friends, could rely on ample course structure, and take advantage of ongoing, weekly instructional and guidance sessions with faculty members. This could also help explain the reluctance participants have to perform the tasks associated with the more field-independent dissertation phase of the program. The cognitive style construct of field dependence-independence complements the social learning construct of locus of control and, in addition, seems to provide considerable insight into how the participants in this study managed or did not manage their doctoral experience.

The Turning Point

There was a point in participants' stories where the narrative shifted away from expressions of satisfaction with their academic experience and the pleasure of being members of a doctoral program instead the narrative expressed dissatisfaction with the doctoral experience. This narrative shift occurred when participants entered the very different world of the doctoral candidate. This shift is narrative is displayed in the following table.

Table 3: The Narrative Shift

The narrative before the Qualifying Examination	The narrative after the Qualifying Examination
Structure:	
"I find myself studying late at night when everyone is asleep and I can concentrate. I can't watch TV and study. I need the quiet, so I have to work at night when the phone won't ring, the kids aren't in and out, and the TV isn't on."	"It was almost a 'now what do I do?' feeling. I'm to begin my dissertation, so this is another new beginning and yet, it's like I've reached the peak." "Class was a part of me and a part that I miss, I'm on my own now!"
" I have so many other things to do [at the office] that I always worked at home."	"As long as you're having a class you're committed but when there is no structure you loose it."
"Generally what I had to do with studying was just commit all my weekends and time off to it."	"Now I can't find the time to get back to [doctoral] work."
"Referring to one course, we wrote what...four pages a week? That's got to be close to 50 pages. Those four pages were about what I could handle in a week."	"Before we had a definite routine. I know I need to get back in that rut to get this done, but it was so hard and I just don" want to do that to myself and my family."
"When I started [courses] I used a typewriter because I have always typed. After about three weeks I said, 'Something has to give and quick!' I learned to use word processing."	"I think that there is not anything pushing it. There's not any...there is no deadline."
	"I'm still a little bit hazy about how to put this [dissertation proposal] thing together."
"When you have regularly scheduled classes that becomes kind of a little world that you deal with."	"I'm in the sixth re-write of my proposal and I don't know how to make it any better!"
Pressure	
"I'm trying to teach school, buy a house and a farm, and work on the doctoral program. I'm balancing a lot of things: everybody wants a piece of me."	"The greatest sense of release was after the Quals."
	"When you get to the point of finishing the oral part it's like 'I'm done, I've climbed to the top of the mountain!"
"I felt that to be successful in this program I had to give up part of my life. I think it was part of my family life...I regret that."	"It was such a relief, a feeling of relief, when all of this was off my back."
	"The relief of that being over was like two tons falling off my shoulders."

The narrative before the Qualifying Examination	The narrative after the Qualifying Examination
"I feel strongly about finishing my course work each semester. No matter what I had to do as far as work or outside activities I made time to get my course work done. It was important for me to do what I had to do, when I had to do it, and do a good job on it."	"I needed a break."
	"...when we started the proposal writing class we were sort of ready, but at the same time just worn out, just exhausted. Most of us slacked off and have slacked off for a year!"
"There is no question that we were pushed in classes. We really were. I think when we look back, it's 'How did we do all that work?'"	" I felt like I don't care what I do, I'm not ready to get done."
Support	
"There were 12 people in my cohort, and there was no one else that knew what I was going through."	"We have gone our separate ways. In some ways that's unfortunate, but it can't be helped."
"The friendships I made in classes are very important to me. Sometimes that was my only interaction with friendly adults!"	"We don't meet now because we are too spread out. We're just too busy."
During the examination, "not being in a room by myself, having friends in the room, helped me feel comfortable."	"There was no support system [after the Qualifying Examination] so we let everything else take over."
"There was a sense of unity that would not have been there had we had a smorgasbord of, say five classes offered five different nights and we just came and went."	"Some problems occurred, you couldn't get to people [faculty]; it wasn't a matter of they didn't want to [return our calls] but they were gone for a week or more at a time."
"One thing I can unreservedly say is none of the faculty ever turned down any request to meet with me. No one ever said, 'I don't have time for you.'"	"In my proposal meeting [my Advisor] rarely said a word." "There are ambiguous remarks on my drafts which don't give me any direction."

The narrative before the Qualifying Examination	The narrative after the Qualifying Examination
Authority	
"I told my Chair my topic idea and he said, 'Let's work on that.' I thought I'd died and gone to heaven!" Here's Dr. Impressive talking to me as if I really have some idea of what I am doing!"	If I was Chairing and you were my student, I would want some feedback from you at least—let's say—each week or ten days. Even if you're not doing anything but saying hello, how are you.
"One thing—I remember the cohort talking about was that Dr. Neat was writing a book. She told us in class, and we thought we were part of the book."	"Without someone standing over you saying this has to be done by a certain time, it's easy to take that break for a long, long time!"
"To have someone of the stature of Dr. Impressive come out to teach us was tremendous."	"What's frustrating is when I write something and I get it back and they have written more than I have! That makes you just want to throw it away and not go back to it."
"The faculty—well they worked at building trust and understanding...they established trust in us."	"It seems the more I send it in the more comments I get about it. It's almost like I went from almost good to this is not very good at all."
Dr. Discourse allowed us...he wanted us to disagree [with him]...it took me half a semester to realize that."	"I could never figure out what their words meant [comments on her proposal]. The day they sat with me in that room and Dr. Graphic wrote on the board...then I could see the whole scheme as she was writing it and it was like, 'Oh, that's what you mean!'"
"The thing about the written exam that I did, that I don't have any self respect over, is I had a question on Demming and quality and all that stuff. And I really wanted to write it the other way, but I wrote it like Demming was this quasi-messiah that has come. I wrote like that because I knew that was what [the professor] wanted to hear. I wrote all this glowing stuff and that was a repugnant sort of thing to me."	"I think they [other candidates] have got to understand that this a process and just because you think your proposal is okay, they're [faculty] not going to think so. That it's part of the hoop-jumping. If you can't do that—and anybody can—you are choosing not to jump. I think when we took the proposal writing class and our writing kept coming back with all these marks on it...they [the candidates] blamed the faculty."

The construct of locus of control helps us understand why the turning point occurred. From participant comments, it is clear they anticipated that the level of faculty guidance and interaction they were used to receiving would continue through the remaining phase of the program. If this perception is accurate, participants evidently expected to continue a faculty-student relationship based on their previous external locus of control experiences. It appears that they became insecure and

discontented with their academic experience when the faculty-student relationship changed, and students were expected to exercise more control over their research proposal and dissertation exercises. It appears that the apparent shift in control expectations on the part of faculty members did not precipitate positive changes in student behaviors; students wanted more external control, but faculty members expected more internal control. The result of this change in control expectations may have added to the dissatisfaction and confusion participants express after they reached the turning point.

Another supporting explanation for the turning point in participant narratives may be found in the construct of field dependence-independence. Once again, there seems to be a programmatic shift away from the highly social cognitive style of field-dependent learning that participants associated with the doctoral experience toward the more field-independent and, accordingly, more autonomous and isolated cognitive style of the dissertation exercise. Participant comments do suggest they missed the academic structure of the pre-dissertation phase of the program. What is more important is that they felt the loss of contact with cohort friends. Their desire for the social learning environment of formal class meetings that necessitated continued close cohort friendships, becomes more understandable if these students are more field-dependent than field-independent in their cognitive style preference.

Some of the discomfort participants associate with the turning point, seems to reflect the lack of structure and support that is consistent with the more autonomous, self-structured, and isolated environment of dissertation work. They acknowledged a need for cohort (social) contact, social and intellectual support, and authoritative direction as contributing to their inability to focus on their dissertation tasks. This explanation of their feelings is supported by Mah's (1986) study, in which his subjects, also doctoral students in a College of Education, demonstrated needs for similar defining aspects of field-dependent behavior. Mah reports that "[t]he isolation from faculty and other students was costly for [about-to-be-doctors] who 1) needed more structure, 2) [felt] unprepared to conceptualize and carry out a dissertation study, [and] 3) lacked self confidence" (p. 133).

Since many participants seemed extremely uncomfortable with the dissertation phase of the doctoral program, it is possible that they explained away their lack of progress at this time by talking about their intense feelings of exhaustion and how their time "just sort of filled up with other important things."

Summary

The purpose behind returning to the academic knowledge base is simple: there is wisdom in seeking out what others can contribute to our understanding of how people manage their lives, and particularly for this report, how successful students might change into unsuccessful doctoral candidates. As a result of exploring the knowledge base, strength was added to the complex interconnections of the four themes in this study. The interactions of authority, support, pressure, and structure gained more credibility when viewed from the perspective to two established constructs. The construct of locus of control expands our understanding of how these participants arranged their lives to be both professional educators and doctoral students, and the field dependence-independence construct aids in explaining the preferences participants had for structure, guidance, and supportive learning groups. In addition field dependence-independence and locus of control constructs help explicate the meaning of experiences participants had at the turning point of the doctoral program.

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